

In Conversation with Liz Rykert

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When properly used, email can transform the standard workplace into a busy, boundless, and more productive "workspace." But harnessing the potential of this powerful tool can be a frustrating and sometimes intimidating experience, especially for working groups unfamiliar with the use of email lists. Until now!

Authors Liz Rykert and Maureen James have developed a [user-friendly guide](#), to help virtual work teams take full advantage of the unique opportunities offered by email. In an interview with Reports, Ms. Rykert talks about using email in a group setting.

What's the difference between a mailing list and a newsgroup or a conference?

An email list is an automated software program that allows you to use a single address to send a message out to multiple participants. You can have it as interactive as you want. It can be public or private, or either moderated or unmoderated. It depends on what the group needs. Email lists are completely asynchronous which means they don't operate within the boundaries of time and place. You can get a group of people working together online without requiring them to be all on the phone or the Internet at the same time. It basically allows you to do group work on email as opposed to having to go somewhere on the Internet which is what you have to do with a newsgroup or a conference, or an internet relay chat (the Internet equivalent of a teleconference).

So there would certainly be some advantages to an email list, even if it wasn't "synchronous." I guess the disadvantage would be that you can't respond right away to what someone says.

Paradoxically, though, there is an advantage to that. I think a lot of people have had the experience in a meeting where they've walked away and said, "Oh, I wish I'd said that!" They miss that opportunity for sober second thoughts. Email lists absolutely accommodate that because people have the opportunity to stop and read what they've said. Maybe they responded in anger. Then they can respond again and really get to the meat of the issue. I've had many experiences where I've helped people to do that. It's quite amazing when you see it happen. It doesn't mean that synchronous meetings are not important. There's an appropriate place for different kinds of communication.

You mentioned the idea of a moderated versus an unmoderated list. In your book, you also talk about facilitation. What's the difference between a moderator and a facilitator?

There are actually three concepts that relate to leadership roles on a mailing list -- and they can all be different people or the same person. There's the listowner who adds and deletes people and fixes problems -- all the technical requirements of running a list. It can be important in some settings to have a moderator. With a moderated list, all messages are reviewed by one, two or more people before they're sent out to the group. Then there's the facilitator who brings people together and helps them interact and stay focused, and to make decisions.

In the book, you mention four requirements for setting up an email list: a committed group of participants, a shared purpose, good facilitation and a well-organized plan. Could you expand on these ideas?

A lot of people set up electronic mailing lists or group workspaces and then nothing happens. You can't just set it up and hope, 'If you build it, they will come.' You want a group of people who are keen and who want to use it, and who all commit to use it. You have to be committed. You also need a clear purpose that says 'this is what the discussion is about.'

What sort of interpersonal skills would an online facilitator need to have?

Typically, they are people who aren't afraid to say what they don't know, as well as what they do know. They're comfortable working in transparent work environments and not worried about people criticizing the content of their written work. They often have a lot of confidence in the electronic environment although they don't have to be highly technical. They're not afraid to fix a problem or keep asking a question until they get an answer. They are very good at understanding how groups of people work together. And they have a degree of openness -- a willingness to listen, as well as to intervene, summarize or talk. When a group needs to select an online facilitator, I tell them to look for the person who's always getting that extra bit of information for people.

For groups that are working in the international field, there must be particular challenges with using email lists. You've got cultural issues, questions of language, and also the technical problems. How do you get around that?

That's where the planning comes in. You can identify a lot of those issues in advance, and talk to people about them, warn them that they'll be present, and be sensitive to them when they emerge and then deal with them.

Access is an issue everywhere. In North America, it's an issue for poor people and visible minorities. In Africa, it's (due to) geography and technology, as well as poverty and other issues. You have to keep pushing to make the technology as accessible as possible. Maureen James -- the co-author of the book -- is in fact doing that right now in South Africa with women's groups. And I'm doing it here in Toronto with homeless folks. The way I encourage people to deal with it is to say, 'Don't let it stop you, but be cautious. Be sensitive. Don't make assumptions that everyone's going to have access. If you have to, connect with people in different ways -- like sending a fax.' We often set it up so that, in a group of people who are mostly not online, one person has a connection. We get this person to download and reformat the information into something that can be printed and distributed by hand. Then they have a meeting, and people give their feedback, and then they feed that back onto the list.

And what about language?

The most common language on international lists is English. Lots of people have been trying to develop instant translation programs, but they're terrible. They don't tolerate accents, for example. It's consistently a problem and in most cases big discussions happen in English, although not exclusively. For instance, when Maureen facilitated a mailing list on women and technology in advance of Global Knowledge '97, a lot of the content was translated into Spanish and then reposted. If it's important for the group, then they work it out as best they can.

What is the most important piece of advice you would give a group about to start an email list?

Reflect on what they do well. If a group is about to create an email list and they hold meetings well and know their territory, I would tap into those strengths and areas of confidence and say, 'That's the same work you'll do online, except that it's not an office that opens at 9:00 a.m. and closes at 5:00 p.m. and has a desk and a chair. It's a virtual workspace that anyone can access at anytime.'

I think a lot of people are waking up to email lists and finding the value in them. My work is almost exclusively planning electronic strategies for people and teaching people how to do electronic work on top of what they're already doing. It's made a huge difference for the groups I'm working with. They love it. They learn how to do it themselves and go off and do all kinds of interesting things. Then they get back to me which is just terrific. I love this work. It's a real passion for me!

The Book

- [From Workplace To Workspace: Using Email Lists to Work Together](#)
- [About the authors](#)
by Maureen James & Liz Rykert, IDRC 1998 (full text online)